

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 383 584

SO 024 751

AUTHOR Garrett, Alan W.
TITLE What Is Curriculum History and Why Is It Important?
PUB DATE Nov 94
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Studies Association (Chapel Hill, NC, November 9-13, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Curriculum Research; *Educational History; Educational Philosophy; Educational Principles; Educational Research; *Educational Theories; *Foundations of Education; Instruction; Knowledge Base for Teaching; Teacher Education
IDENTIFIERS *Curriculum History

ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that curriculum history should not be circumscribed by narrow, sometimes arbitrary, definitions that tend to be limiting. Curriculum history considers what societies value enough to pass on to younger generations through its schools. The foremost question which has not changed throughout the years is "What should schools teach?" Curriculum historians address two important questions as they look to the past and its continuing influence on the present: (1) What was the understood knowledge in previous times? and (2) What are the end results of curriculum thought and practice? The study distinguishes between the intended curriculum and the enacted curriculum and how those two often varied greatly. Previous research shows how earlier curriculum theorists and practitioners have addressed those questions. A criticism of the lack of knowledge of curriculum history by practitioners in the field is made with a strong case presented for better preparation of future teachers in learning more about the field. (EH)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

What is Curriculum History and Why is It Important?

Alan W. Garrett

Eastern New Mexico University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official
OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

ALAN W.
GARRETT

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

151 420 05

What is Curriculum History and Why is It Important?

Alan W. Garrett

Eastern New Mexico University

The term "curriculum" carries with it a multiplicity of meanings. To some educators, the curriculum consists of conscious, often written, intentions commonly described in courses of study and other formal documents. To others, it is more aptly defined at the classroom level, by the intentions and actions of individual teachers with specific students. Some educators might contend that the curriculum is best described by what students actually learn in schools, whether as a part of an intentional plan or not. Ivor Goodson's description of curriculum as a "slippery concept" is appropriate.¹ The curriculum, no matter how conceptualized, is the result of an amalgamation of often competing ideas and goals urged upon schools by a variety of individuals and groups.² It is "messy" as well as slippery.

Alternative views of how to define the curriculum have led to equally diverse opinions as to what should constitute the study of curriculum history.³ Curriculum historians appear to have taken Herbert Kliebard's advice concerning the curriculum itself and have applied it to their own studies. While lamenting the tendency to formulate the curriculum in terms of precise educational objectives, Kliebard noted about

Prepared for the American Educational Studies Association Meeting, November 9-13, 1994, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

any discipline, "So to define it is to trivialize it."⁴ Curriculum history should not be circumscribed by narrow, perhaps arbitrary, definitions that tend to be limiting rather than supportive. Since the early 1980s, curriculum historians have tended to minimize their debates over narrow proscriptions of what does or does not properly fall within the domain of their field and, instead, have accepted a broader view, such as that proposed earlier by Arno Bellack who stressed the relationship between curriculum history, educational history, cultural history, and intellectual history.⁵ Curriculum history, thus, considers what societies value enough to pass on to younger generations through the schools they establish. It is a "highly significant artifact of our [or, of any] culture."⁶

Perhaps one of the best ways to begin to think about curriculum history is by recognizing what it is not. Foremost, it is not a search for answers to current educational problems.⁷ Skeptics of the value of historical studies claim that such research is not practical; it is of minimal immediate utilitarian value, since it does not provide easy, off-the-shelf cures to modern educational ailments.⁸ This view presumes a cyclical yet stagnating educational world, one in which old problems regularly rear their heads in identical, or, at least, very similar, contexts. More damaging than this simplistic view of the world is the conception of educators that such a viewpoint conveys: Current-day educators are making the same mistakes

made by their predecessors and need only look back to some intellectually superior generation to find their answers. Fortunately, the world changes. Problems faced today are not identical to those of the past. Our professional forebears probably had enough difficulty dealing with the issues of their days; they did not have the wisdom nor prescience to foretell nor the time to solve problems that lay in the unknown future.

Yet, educators of the past did leave their intellectual descendents wonderful legacies. The curriculum historian sometimes must be careful not to cross the boundary and engage in "'the sin of evangelism.'"⁹ The search for truth must remain paramount. As today's educators attain understandings of past events, ideas, and personalities, as they begin to study curriculum history, they find themselves engaged in a continuous dialogue that has existed as long as have schools.¹⁰ The topic has remained the same throughout the years: What should schools teach?

When educators enter into this dialogue with their colleagues of the past, they enhance greatly their own curriculum memory. Most teachers and other educators have an "impressively thin" knowledge of what happened outside of their own personal experiences.¹¹ Those who do look to the past to enhance their own understandings often fail to extend beyond some artificially imposed temporal limit, mistakenly believing that to cross that imaginary boundary would lead them into the land of the irrelevant.¹² Remaining oblivious

to what has happened outside of one's personal realm of experience often leads to "uncritical acceptance of fundamental ideas and ways of thought inherited from past curriculum leaders," the sense that the educational world is the way it is because it always has been that way and, therefore, always must remain that way.¹³ Curriculum history is one avenue through which understanding not only of the past but also of the present may be gained. Alone, it probably is insufficient for these tasks, but, undoubtedly, it is necessary.

Kliebard suggested two important questions that curriculum historians face as they try to uncover and interpret the past and its continuing influences on the present. First, they seek what was "taken to be knowledge" in previous times.¹⁴ Although educators and others who influence curriculum decisions do not always make the best possible choices, their work tells present-day educators much about belief, thought, and conventional wisdom during other times. Second, curriculum historians seek to determine the end results of curriculum thought and practice. These results have two distinct aspects, the social benefits of what is included in the curriculum and the social costs of ignoring what is excluded from it, and the effects on students (and society) of differential access to the curriculum, largely a legacy of the so-called scientific curriculum makers.¹⁵ Curriculum history, thus, must concern itself with both theory and practice, intention and reality.

One convenient way to consider these two components of curriculum history is to make the distinction between the intended curriculum and the enacted curriculum. That is, those who write or study curriculum history must realize that what curriculum leaders and other individuals in positions of influence or authority asserted should be studied in schools and what actually transpired in classrooms between students and teachers often differed greatly. Studies at both levels of understanding are important and of value. Differences between the intended and enacted curriculum can provide great insights into the schooling process. The earliest curriculum history research began with the intended curriculum, the more visible of the two and, in almost every case, the better documented.

Goodson strongly advocated studies of the intended, or written, curriculum. Although the formal, written curriculum of today often bears little resemblance to much of classroom practice, and there is little reason to believe this situation was to any great degree different in the past, the history of the written curriculum merits attention for at least three reasons. It allows consideration of major themes and movements that might be less obvious in studies of particular classrooms, schools, or school districts. The written curriculum, both proposed and enacted, allows educators to witness the intellectual arena in which past curriculum decisions were made. Finally, the historical written curriculum can provide an enhanced understanding of

the current educational situation.¹⁶ Four general categories of studies fall within the domain of this aspect of curriculum history.

Historical studies of curriculum theories and movements remain predominant in both number and stature. Recalling attempts "to transform the curriculum more or less as a whole through doctrines and ideologies that reflect both fundamental pedagogical and social beliefs" provides the backdrop from which all other historical studies can be better understood.¹⁷ Since curriculum does not evolve in a logical or orderly fashion but, instead, results from the interactions of a variety of competing interests, the fact that often contradictory proposals commonly are uncovered should not be surprising.¹⁸ Those proposals that did not "win" should not be ignored. They may offer valuable insights into alternative viewpoints and provide an understanding of the resistance to change so common to much of school reform.¹⁹ More detailed knowledge of curriculum leaders provides better understanding of their proposals, both those which succeeded and those that did not.

Biographies of well known curriculum figures such as Bobbitt, Caswell, Tyler, and Taba, add new perspectives to the ideas they espoused. Their words take on new meanings as their lives become better known.²⁰ Franklin Bobbitt provides an excellent example. His scientific curriculum making seems to many readers, at first, a logical scheme to increase the utility of schools and to "meet the needs" of a variety of

students. His work all too well describes the realities of schools as a number of people know them, for many of his ideas have been accepted uncritically as basic tenets of curriculum orthodoxy. Familiarity with Bobbitt's association with the eugenics movement, however, allows consideration of his work from a less benign perspective.²¹ The unintended, unstated consequences of his scientific curriculum making are great and remain ignored by many educators.

Although most people historically involved with the curriculum probably did not leave enough documentary materials for the contemporary researcher to produce a well developed biography of them, another means exists to uncover their ideas and beliefs. Committee reports and policy statements prepared by committees commonly reflect the "dominant intellectual and social ideas" of the period in which they were written.²² These documents, often contributed to by influential, if less well known, curriculum and educational leaders, allow the present day reader to discover significant beliefs from earlier times. Often, such reports are associated with particular school subjects, providing another possible way to view curriculum history.

School subjects often provide evidence of how more general curriculum theories or ideas were interpreted and enacted in specific contexts, often with the aim of solving particular problems.²³ Also, as the most obvious manifestations of curriculum practice, school subjects can provide the key to what Goodson described as looking "behind

the schoolhouse door."²⁴ Studies of curriculum in schools remain remarkably few. The lack of attention to curriculum reality no doubt is due both to the difficulty in conducting such studies and to the lack of "glamor" associated with them. Although consideration of actual curriculum practice has been marginalized to a great extent, the importance of this aspect of curriculum history remains. Curriculum, through the apparatus of school subjects, is the "'black box'" through which organized educational institutions seek to achieve their goals.²⁵ To ignore the seemingly mundane realities of curriculum practice is to lose the richness of curriculum history, the diversity of relatively autonomous local curriculum makers and educators.

Several avenues exist to approach the problem of what really happened in schools. Curriculum historians may conduct case studies of particular reforms or time periods in specific schools or school districts or investigate the curriculum of a single subject within the context of one locality.²⁶ Such studies will in all probability provide examples of the process Kliebard termed "hybridization," the modification of generalized curriculum theories, precepts, or edicts, to satisfy the realities of local conditions.²⁷ Such hybridization often occurs at the level of the individual classroom. Thus, biographies of generally unknown teachers may add as much to understanding the curriculum of the past as do those of well known leaders of the field.²⁸ Yet, curriculum history, as well as educational history as a

whole, tends to ignore the nuances of what happened in real classrooms, involving real students and real teachers. Such omissions tend to weaken the field, depriving it of potential detail and depth.

Curriculum history, nevertheless, remains an important and often overlooked area of educational inquiry. Although it does not pretend to offer simplistic ready made answers to current problems, it does provide new perspectives from which to address contemporary issues. These perspectives can be valuable at all levels at which the curriculum is considered, constructed, and modified.

As O. L. Davis, Jr., observed, "The curriculum field is an activist, largely nonreflective enterprise."²⁹ Many individuals who are involved in curriculum design and implementation fail not only to ask questions about what they are doing, why they are doing it, and the potential implications of their actions, but they fail even to recognize that such questions should be asked.³⁰ They accept the traditions of curriculum as invariant truths of the field; they do not question the tenets of their intellectual predecessors and accept their "wisdom" uncritically. Educators, thus, are poised to replicate "the [curriculum] field's undesirable traditions."³¹

Education, virtually alone among the areas of human inquiry, tends to eschew the historical dimension in the preparation of its future practitioners. Aside from the increasingly rare mandatory undergraduate foundations course

or graduate level history of education course, both of which seldom address curriculum history, educators rarely are required to consider the historical development of the ideas that guide their field. They are not encouraged to think historically about their own work. The resulting lack of perspective tends to minimize the recognition of the significance of context in the making of educational and, especially, curriculum decisions and to blur the fact that curriculum is the complex result of the interaction of a variety of competing interests.³² Too many educators enter their classrooms and schools confident in their beliefs that all that is new is good (even all that is "new" is, in fact, new), that universal answers exist to many or all problems currently faced, and that these answers can be reduced to a simple series of step-by-step mechanical procedures.³³ In other words, they may fail even to acknowledge the complexity of the problems they face daily and the undeniable fact that they, more than the so-called experts external to the school, are integral to the solution of these problems. Educators knowledgeable about curriculum history would be more skeptical of every "innovative" answer that comes their way; they would ask questions. Asking questions and making decisions based on critical contemplation of curriculum proposals are vital to the currently much sought after empowerment and to the even more important goal of educational improvement.

Curriculum history must not remain the isolated dominion of a few specialists. It should constitute an important element of all educators' preparations; it should encourage new ways of considering the curriculum. Davis clearly described the power and limits of curriculum history:

[H]istorical studies of curriculum should help us to understand the antecedents of the present course of study and of our professional field. Possessing understanding, we may explore contemporary justifications, analyze new proposals, and, informed, invent more appropriate, more consistent, more valid curriculum. Then, on the other hand, we may not.³⁴

The decision Davis offered can be made only with the background provided by curriculum history. Without that background, uninformed lurches from one crisis to the next, following one proposed panacea after another, will continue.

¹ Ivor F. Goodson, Studying Curriculum: Cases and Methods (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994), p. 17.

² Herbert M. Kliebard, "Constructing a History of the American Curriculum," in Handbook of Research on Curriculum, ed. Philip W. Jackson (New York: Macmillan, 1992), p. 157.

³ Following publication of the 1976 ASCD Yearbook, Perspectives on Curriculum History, 1776-1976, for example, Barry M. Franklin engaged O. L. Davis, Jr., the yearbook's editor, in a spirited debate in the pages of Curriculum Inquiry over the proper focus for historical studies in curriculum. Barry M. Franklin, "Curriculum History: Its Nature and Bounds, An Essay Review of the 1976 Yearbook of the ASCD," Curriculum Inquiry 7 (Spring 1977): 67-79; O. L. Davis, Jr., "The Nature and Boundaries of Curriculum History: A Contribution to Dialogue Over a Yearbook and Its Review," Curriculum Inquiry 7 (Summer 1977): 157-168; Barry M. Franklin, "Franklin on Davis on Franklin on Davis," Curriculum Inquiry 8 (Summer 1978): 177-178; O. L. Davis, Jr., "The Last Mirror: Davis on Davis and Franklin," Curriculum Inquiry 9 (Spring 1979): 59-60.

⁴ Herbert M. Kliebard, "Bureaucracy and Curriculum Theory," in Freedom, Bureaucracy, and Schooling (1971 ASCD Yearbook), ed. Vernon F. Haubrich (Washington, DC: ASCD, 1971), p. 92 (emphasis in original).

⁵ Arno A. Bellack, "History of Curriculum Thought and Practice," Review of Educational Research 39 (June 1969): 283-292. This article generally is credited as being the seminal work in modern curriculum history.

⁶ Herbert M. Kliebard and Barry M. Franklin, "The Course of the Course of Study: History of Curriculum," in Historical Inquiry in Education: A Research Agenda, ed. John Hardin Best (Washington, DC: AERA, 1983), p. 152.

- 7 Bellack, "History of Curriculum Thought and Practice," p. 291.
- 8 I have addressed this shortsighted view at greater length in a previous article. Alan W. Garrett, "Curriculum History's Connections to the Present: Necessary Lessons for Informed Practice and Theory," Journal of Curriculum and Supervision 9 (Summer 1994): 390-395.
- 9 Bellack, "History of Curriculum Thought and Practice," p. 291.
- 10 Herbert M. Kliebard, "Curriculum Past and Curriculum Present," Educational Leadership 33 (January 1976), p. 245.
- 11 O. L. Davis, Jr., "Memory, Our Educational Practice, and History," Educational Forum 56 (Summer 1992), p. 376.
- 12 Ibid., p. 378.
- 13 Kliebard, "Constructing a History of the American Curriculum," p. 161.
- 14 Ibid., p. 158 (emphasis in original).
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Goodson, Studying Curriculum, pp. 18-20, 25.
- 17 Kliebard, "Constructing a History of the American Curriculum," p. 173.
- 18 Ibid., p. 174.
- 19 Kliebard and Franklin, "The Course of the Course of Study," p. 147.
- 20 Kliebard, "Constructing a History of the American Curriculum," p. 167.
- 21 Raymond E. Callahan, Education and the Cult of Efficiency: A Study of the Forces That Have Shaped the Administration of Public Schools (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 79.
- 22 Kliebard, "Constructing a History of the American Curriculum," p. 162.
- 23 Ibid., p. 180.
- 24 Goodson, Studying Curriculum, p. 51.
- 25 Ibid., pp. 40-41.
- 26 Kliebard, "Constructing a History of the American Curriculum," p. 175-176.
- 27 Ibid., p. 174.
- 28 Goodson, Studying Curriculum, p. 57.
- 29 Davis, "The Nature and Boundaries of Curriculum History," p. 159.
- 30 Franklin, "Curriculum History: Its Nature and Bounds," p. 70.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Kliebard, "Constructing a History of the American Curriculum," pp. 158, 181.
- 33 Kliebard, "Curriculum Past and Curriculum Present," p. 247.
- 34 Davis, "The Nature and Bounds of Curriculum History," p. 159.